



Map services and data available from U.S. Geological Survey, National Geospatial Program.

August 5, Aspen Campground

Arriving at the Yosemite Big Oak Flat entrance kiosk, the ranger requests my entry permit number. I start to read the long series of numerals and she says give her the piece of paper. That seems easier than my reading all those disparate numbers through a mask and her understanding each one while writing it down. The permit number checks out. She hands me back the sheet of paper and wishes me a good trip. I drive on, pull over to the side, and use hand sanitizer. Thus is travel in a Covid 19 world.

There is not much traffic on Tioga Road. I stop at one of the pullouts overlooking the immense canyon of Yosemite Creek to eat lunch. I enjoy a sandwich and the view in solitude until a family pulls in as I am getting back in my car. The traffic increases. Between Yosemite Creek and Olmstead Point, I pull over twice into turnouts to permit passing by tailgating drivers who do not want to observe the 45 mile per hour speed limit. The numerous bear crossing signs are not a sufficient deterrent to discourage them from speeding down the road.

At Tenaya Lake, cars fill the legal pullouts and roadside parking. I encounter the same phenomenon at Tuolumne Meadows where nearly every roadside pullout contains a parked car. The parking lots are blocked off to the store and campground. The large parking lot by the Wilderness Permit building is only half-filled.

I follow a respectful distance behind an SUV making its way up to Tioga Pass, enjoying passing by beautiful Dana Meadows. Heading down from the pass, I turn at Saddlebag Lake. Rumbling over the dirt and rock, the rough road beats up my Prius as I slowly make it to the Sawmill Walk-in Campground parking. Nearly every parking space is taken. I find one empty space, park the car, and get out sanitary wipes, money, and pen. At the sign with the campground rules there is a clearly written notice declaring "8/5 campground full." The handwriting is the same as the host at Saddlebag Lake Campground where my wife Barbara and I camped in June. The host also is responsible for Sawmill and so I trust the note. I see no reason to waste time

to walk a quarter mile in and back to confirm it. The Covid closing of the Yosemite campgrounds obviously effects the occupancy of the campgrounds along Tioga Road.

Rumbling back down the road, there is a “campground full” sign at Junction as well as Ellery Lake. I head down to Poole Power Plant Road and its series of campsites. There, I turn right with the sign pointing to Big Bend Campground. I assume the small, gorgeous Big Bend is full, but the nearer, larger Aspen Campground may not be. I only need one campsite. When I pull into Aspen, there is one unoccupied site with no shade, campsite number 8. All the rest seem to be occupied so I take eight. It proves to be okay. I may not be on the creek, but I have no immediate neighbors to be concerned about, a major issue in this pandemic.

After registering, I erect the tent while sending home a SPOT message. The Check-in/OK message shows a question mark, meaning it may or may not be delivered. Since it is possible, I decide to phone home. I have good reasons to check in before heading into the backcountry.

This is my first Sierra backpacking trip since my disastrous accident last August. Among the injuries that required a helicopter rescue by Mono County SAR was my left shoulder. While not broken, it was separated and the scan revealed a severe tear to the rotator cuff. I spent four months in physical therapy, unable to raise my arm over my head until December. How would it respond to a full backpack? It seemed to be okay on test hikes and one overnight trip to Wildcat Campground in Point Reyes, but what about on more rugged terrain?

Of more immediate concern is that I was forced to wear a twenty-four hour heart monitor through the entire month of July due to passing out at Saddlebag Lake in June. Barbara and I believed that was due to dehydration caused by not drinking sufficient water and traveling from sea level to 10,000 feet. However, protocol required wearing the heart monitor with its wires dangling from electrodes, which over the month became an annoying constant presence. On top of that, I was forced to cancel a scheduled backpacking trip to Garnet and Thousand Island lakes. My Kaiser personal

physician said it should be okay to take this trip since I should have been contacted if there was anything amiss on the heart monitor. There has been no contact so I feel as confident as I can under the circumstances. However, checking in by phone seems a good idea since it should be easy to do.

There is a ranger station two or three miles down the road with a pay phone I've used on previous trips. I drive down the road, pull in the ranger station and see the phone still in its familiar place. I park, gather my sanitary wipes along with my phone card and take them to the phone. With a wipe, I pick up the phone receiver. There's no dial tone. I push buttons, flick the phone cradle, and get silence. The phone is dead. Okay, I'll drive another mile or so to the Tioga Gas Mart and use the phone there.

I pull into the Tioga Gas Mart and find a parking space along the western wall. Gathering my sanitary wipes and wearing a mask, I walk across the parking lot and notice the phone is no longer in its familiar place. Maybe they moved it? I ask an employee about the pay phone. He directs me inside. I ask the clerk. She says they took out the pay phone and I'll have to drive into Lee Vining to make a call since there is no cell phone service. What do people do here if it is a real emergency?

Back in the car, I turn left at the highway 395 junction, waiting for five cars to turn left from 395 to Tioga Road. I pull in across the street from the Mono Market where there is a pay phone outside, which I've also used in the past. I check to see if I have a cell phone signal. "No service" the phone proclaims. Once more gathering my mask and sanitary wipes, I get out of the car, cross 395, and make my way to the phone. I pick up the handset. Again, there's no dial tone. I hit various buttons and still no dial tone. I drop in a quarter to see if that helps. No, the quarter passes through to the coin return. *Now what?*

I walk down to the market and open the door. The cash register is just inside. I wait for the clerk to finish with a customer and ask about the pay phone. She's polite and says wait a minute while she takes care of the next person in line. When done, she and I walk down to the phone. She tries it and there's no dial tone. She asks, "Who are you trying to call?"

“My wife.”

She motions me to follow her back to the store. She hands me her cell phone and says I can use it. Her phone gets a signal. I take her phone outside and find a place out of the way to stand. Dialing home, Barbara answers on the third ring with a questioning “Hello.” The caller ID is unfamiliar, but the location is, so she assumes it is me. I explain about using the clerk’s phone. She tells me that Kaiser had called and the heart monitor was *not* okay, as we had assumed. I may have a heart condition called a “sick sinus syndrome,” which means I may need a pacemaker. However, I can still take this trip. I just need to meet with the cardiologist the day after my return and send many more SPOT messages to reassure people I’m okay. Instead of sending in the morning, campsite arrival, and possibly at night, it’s now at least morning, mid-morning, noon, mid-afternoon, campsite arrival, evening, and night.

Feeling devastated, I return the phone to the busy clerk by placing it on the shelf behind her with a dollar bill underneath and thank her for her help and kindness. In a daze, I cross 395, start the car, drive down to a cross street, and execute a u-turn. I almost miss the Tioga Road turnoff.

Back at my campsite at Aspen, I muse on the implications of that phone call. Is this to be my last Sierra backpack trip? I have to assume it may well be, except they said it was okay to go, at least this time. When I get home and have the appointment with the cardiologist, I’ll find out if I will continue to backpack. My mind races over the many “what if” scenarios. What if I’m told I can still go, but not solo? Who could possibly want to go with someone who is 70 years old and prefers to be alone, but needs to be watched for indications he is about to die? That strikes me as morbidly ridiculous.

This may be the last time. Now the Rolling Stones song is running through my head—Keith Richards’ guitar riff, Charlie Watts’ backbeat, and Mick Jagger’s voice. This *really* could be the last time. On every trip the last three years since my right kidney was removed due to cancer, I always kept that thought in the back of my mind. But that thought resided in the *back* of my mind. Now it’s no longer in the back. It’s way in the *front*. This is not going to be a normal trip. I can’t really absorb all this.

In the evening, I walk out on the adjoining meadow on a grass path trampled into a trail that follows Lee Vining Creek. It is a tranquil sojourn away from the bustle of the campground. The last light falls on the crags above Lee Vining Canyon. As it gets dark, I sit at the picnic table and write by Luci light. I do not know what the next five days will bring. I must “go with the flow,” the ebb and tide of each day and relate it to all subsequent days.

I take a final walk to gaze on the meadow in the starlight to somehow help reconcile the last few hours.

August 6, Aspen Campground to Upper Virginia Canyon

I awake a little before 5:30. The rest of the campground is still asleep. I take down the tent and retrieve the things in the bear box. While eating a blueberry muffin and drinking orange juice, I pack, being sure to leave out lunch and a couple of bars in the upper flap pocket. The campground awakens. An RV drives by exiting the campground. When I reach Tioga Road, traffic is nearly non-existent. On highway 395, a few cars, RVs, and trucks head up and down as the road passes through Lee Vining with Mono Lake on the right. The highway winds up to Conway Summit where I turn left onto the road to Virginia Lakes.

The road to the trailhead is paved until it passes Virginia Lakes Resort. The last half mile of dirt road would benefit from a little maintenance. One party of three men in a couple of cars is already in the parking lot. I unload the car, lock it, put on the camera bag and backpack, then pick up the trekking pole. As I am running through in my mind everything I will need for the next five days, I reach the trailhead sign and remember the GPS. *Where did I put it?* I take off the pack and remember it's in the left hipbelt pocket. I am panicking over nothing. All the anxiety is affecting my thinking. Taking a long, deep breath, I tell myself to be in the moment.

For the first portion of the trail, I follow the two hikers from the parking lot who are soon joined by the third friend who passes me at a convenient overlook. I plod up past Cooney Lake and Frog Lakes and begin the long

switchbacking climb to the saddle separating Virginia Lakes Trail drainage from the Green Creek Trail drainage. A packer from Virginia Lakes Pack Station passes me with an appreciative hello and thank you for stepping well off the trail. A family of four dayhikers speeds by as the father points out it's not too far to the top. When I plod my way up the final switchback, the family is perched on a pile of rocks to the left of the trail.

The long switchbacking climb down to the Green Creek Trail junction is more gnarly than I recall. Perhaps it's the budgetary lack of trail maintenance over the last thirty-one years. On this trip's last day, this climb will not be pleasant and so it would be best to camp at Summit Lake rather than lower down in Virginia Canyon. In the distance, Summit Lake shines in the mid-day sun. The switchbacks come to a memorable overlook of the Hoover Lakes and Green Creek Trail before soon meeting the trail junction. When the trail crosses the outlet creek below Summit Lake, I stop for lunch. After a short climb, I round a bend and see Summit Lake, a beautiful half-mile-long near-ellipse below Camiaca Peak and directly below peak 11,270. Summit Lake is personally significant due to camping here twice previously, once with our young son Gordon in 1988 and also with Barbara in 1995.

The group of three men is stopped at the first campsite at the lake's east end. One of the them has a boot whose sole has separated. Do I have any duct tape, they ask? The tiny amount I have wrapped around a pen is minuscule compared to the spool they already have. The campsite I remember further down the lake is occupied.

At the far end of the lake, I come upon the distinctive metal signs announcing Yosemite National Park. The trail zig-zags down to Return Creek and Virginia Canyon. This trail is also more gnarly than I remember. Near the bottom, I meet a woman who is one of the people camped at Summit Lake. At the Return Creek crossing, her husband is talking with another man. The trail to Virginia Pass heads off to the right, the sign declaring 1.5 miles to the pass.

This descent has told me that I barely have the necessary stamina to travel another two of three miles down Virginia Canyon and then make it to upper Spiller Creek Canyon tomorrow, the planned itinerary. I used

to be able to make that entire distance on the first-day, as when I went from Mosquito Flat to Grinnell Lake. Now it will be two full days, much of it hiking in the forested canyon. This is not what I want to be doing on what may be my final trip. I do not want to spend it walking in forest. I want to be in timberline country taking leisurely mornings and long, slow afternoons experiencing and appreciating the High Sierra. I decide to head up Virginia Canyon for a mile or so, look for a campsite, and re-assess this trip. I no longer want to undertake wipe-out hikes. I want to experience being in wilderness.

I stop to eat a bar at a convenient rock by Return Creek. The three men come down the trail and also pause for a rest stop as I head up the trail to Virginia Pass. After about a quarter mile, the trail comes to a rock hop crossing of Return Creek. Now following the west side of the creek, the path heads up and away from the water. At this point in the day, even this short climb feels difficult. After this short ascent, the trail heads back down towards the creek. On the creek's other side, I see what appears to be a campsite. While I rock hop across the creek to explore this place, the three men follow the trail to another crossing of Return Creek and head up the canyon.

A large dead pine lies over what would be the tent area. This definitely is no longer a campsite. Intersecting the trail, I head up the canyon. When the trail comes to another crossing of Return Creek, the more visible trail crosses the creek and heads up to a row of trees with campsites while the actual trail to Virginia Pass goes off to the right. The three men have already taken the campsites. Crossing the creek, I check out the place immediately above where Barbara and I camped in 1995. The small stand of whitebarks remains, but the area is now overgrown. I can still manage to make out the spot we pitched our tent where there are now stunted bushes. I wave at the three men as I head up the canyon past the row of now-occupied campsites. Another fallen tree has wiped out the campsite beyond their sites. I see an area of trees on the other side of the creek that looks it might be good. On the way there, I pass a possible site set in a nook of whitebarks and reject it. The other side of the creek looks more promising.

When I get there after rock-hopping the creek, it is also overgrown. A hundred yards away, a man is checking out a possible area. The man rejects it and continues up the canyon. Not wanting to engage in a campsite race, I head back to the nook. I consider cowboy camping in the nook, but decide to erect the tent. While this is not a formal campsite, the creek runs by about 150 feet below and the view of upper Virginia Canyon is breathtaking. Virginia Peak rises before me with Gray Butte and its long ridge behind me to the west and Camiaca Peak to the southeast. This upper portion is really the culmination of Virginia Canyon. This is Sierra timberline country in all its majestic magnificence.

I cannot rationally explain the lure of the High Sierra wilderness. It's not simply its incomparable beauty. There are numerous places in the United States and the world that are acknowledged as even more stunningly beautiful. From the Grand Canyon to the Swiss Alps to the Himalayas to Patagonia there are places that possess greater dramatic beauty. What the High Sierra possesses is a feeling of serenity that permeates the core of my being. That feeling is undefinable yet palpably present. The world, existence itself, feels right, truly right at 10,000 feet at a High Sierra meadow or lake. For someone else, there may be other places that cause that singular sense of serenity. For me, it's the High Sierra.

As I unpack and set up the tent, I send home a predefined SPOT message to let Barbara know I changed my itinerary. So far today, I have sent four "Check-in/OK" messages. Before the day concludes, I will send three more messages, including a text reply to Barbara's question of where am I going. "Return Lake" I reply. Check marks inform me that the messages were delivered; thankfully there are no question marks. My shoulder feels the same as it always does following extensive exertion: a deep, sharp ache lets me know it may be permanently damaged, but that is the extent of the pain.

In the late afternoon light, sunbeams emanate from a gap by Virginia Peak and travel down the canyon. After dinner, I revel in the final magical moments of the day. In the distance, the Shepherd Crest and, directly above, Virginia Peak shine in the day's last light. To the east, Camiaca Peak glows below a smattering of pink clouds. Tomorrow I will go to Return Lake.

August 7, Virginia Canyon to Return Lake

It is a magnificent morning in upper Virginia Canyon. The first light glows from Virginia Peak, the red-gold crags reflected in a pool of Return Creek. I attempt to freeze that moment in time. Mere words are inadequate for encapsulating this timeless moment that will remain etched in memory. The myriad of feelings conjured forth in that single moment can fill volumes.

After twenty-three years of solo backpacking, my morning routine is long etched in stone. I wake at first light, slowly putting on extra layers of clothing (sweater, polartec pants, puffy jacket). Sitting in the tent doorway, I put on my shoes, untied. The camera, tripod, water bottles, and hat are placed in front of the tent. Standing up, I put on my hat and tie my shoes. Extending the tripod legs two-thirds, I secure the camera to the tripod, put the camera bag over my shoulder, and attach the pint water bottle to the camera strap.

I take in my surroundings, attempting to precisely predict behind which peak or ridge the sun will emerge. Even when I've attempted to use "The Photographer's Ephemeris," the exact position of the sun in relation to where I might be exactly standing does not precisely calculate. Besides, I enjoy the inherent spontaneity more than soulless mathematical application to a personal creative process. It's a matter of craft and improvisation to properly respond to that particular morning's play of light.

If there are colorful clouds (red sky at morning), I attempt to find the best photo. If not, I await the emergence of the day's first light to strike one or more of the surrounding peaks. Sometimes it's a distant summit, sometimes a nearby mountain. For the next hour or so, I am lost in the enthrallment of trying to capture photos that somehow translate the ecstasy of the emerging day. I have no idea if any photo actually is a "keeper." For those brief moments, what I photograph speaks to me. Though I feel what is said in my marrow, I do not know if those distinct communications translate. I try to be a conduit for the message of nature, but how well those eternal truths are communicated is unknown.

After an hour or so, I return to my campsite and send home a SPOT Check-in-OK message. A pot of water is filled to the proper level from a lake or creek. The bear can is opened and breakfast extracted. I begin heating the pot of water while making a cup of Tang. By the time I drink the Tang, the water is nearly boiling. I put some raisins and a package of instant oatmeal into the cup. The now-boiling water is poured into the cup with the remainder of the water put in a thermos, the lightest 32 ounce insulated thermos I could find at REI.

I eat the oatmeal and then sit and enjoy a couple of cups of coffee with a Luna bar while I write and gaze on the wondrous land all around. I scribble down whatever thoughts enter my mind, from a description of the previous day to whatever feels profound at this moment. I don't worry about exact wording. It's about the what and why, not the how. This is my favorite time, reveling in the newly emerged day.

In the backcountry, the daily duties are few and simple. Yes, doing everything in a manner that conforms to leave-no-trace principles requires a little bit of thought and maybe even minor inconvenience, such as digging a six inch hole (a spare tent stake comes in handy) and putting used toilet paper in it's own plastic bag. Otherwise, life is much simpler in the backcountry. No one phones, no one demands one accomplish anything. After the initial trailhead, no one else decides where to go.

After coffee and writing, I proceed with the rest of the day, which today means it's time to pack up and head up to Return Lake. So far, so good, even if it is not what I planned.

Virginia Canyon has changed over the last twenty-five years. The near ecological area has been altered with sections overrun by pines and bushes. My memory tells me the way up to Virginia Pass was relatively open, not dotted with bushes and pines, as now. Is this due to climate change? An increase in vegetation at higher elevations is one of the predicted results of a warming planet along with the negative affects on animal life, such as pikas. One of the tragic outcomes of the last quarter century has been our failure to confront and correct the transformations caused by human

actions to our complex, fragile ecosystems. These changes in Virginia Canyon are not the natural results of evolution. I take comfort in the fact that the far area of peaks remains seemingly unchanged.

The short climb up to Return Lake turns out to be a joy. I follow the ledges, rocks, and grass to the far right of the creek, allowing the landscape to dictate my route. Part way up, there is a lovely campsite near the creek. When I arrive at the lake, there is a group exploring the east (left) shore. I decide to go right. There is a great spot by the outlet creek and lake that is too close to the water for legal camping, though it was probably used in the past. Hopping the outlet creek, I find a campsite in a grove of whitebarks above the lake, set up the tent, and send an “at the campsite” SPOT. While wandering around, I find a better campsite farther from the lake with lots of convenient rocks and ledges for sitting on or leaning against. I fill the pack with everything except the tent, bring it to the new campsite, go back, unstack the tent and pick it up with the sleeping bag and pad inside, the rolled up ground cover tucked under one arm and the stakes in one hand. Fortunately, the wind is barely blowing so the transfer of the tent is not difficult. At the new campsite, I put down the tent, lay out the ground cover, then place the tent over the ground cover and stake it down.

I may not be in solitude tonight, but it is solitude to me in the sense I don't see any other party from my campsite. As long as they are not noisy, other campers usually disappear from my perspective. If I do not see them or hear them, I feel in solitude.

The clouds to the southwest look more and more ominous. The wind picks up as before a storm and eventually the first raindrops fall. I seek refuge in the tent. The storm arrives in full force with rain, hail, lightning, and thunder. The first lightning strike is bright enough to light up the inside of the tent. One of my neighbors must still be outside since I hear an exclaimed “WOW” concurrent with the lightening bolt. The thunder is instantaneous with the flash, shaking the ground. Subsequent lightning seems further away since the thunder occurs several second after the flash.

There are two bouts of hail. The first consists of pea sized ice balls that lasts for a few minutes. The second occurs thirty minutes later with larger

size ice balls that Giantbrookie on High Sierra Topix accurately referred to it as “tofu cube sized.” Otherwise it’s a steady rain with the plops becoming a drizzle as the frequency slowly lessens until the plops return for another onslaught. This continues for an hour and a half before the storm eventually passes and I exit the tent to once again take in the surroundings.

The late afternoon light brightens Virginia Canyon from Twin Peaks down to the distant Shepherd Crest. The light gradually recedes from the western end of the canyon and the shadows creep down to cover the upper canyon until they reach last night’s campsite, then the area in the forest by the trail junction. Camiaca Peak and Excelsior Mountain shine in the slowly diminishing light, shadows appearing in their craggy crannies until only the top portion of Camiaca glows at day’s end and twilight begins. Venus sparkles against the darkening blue sky.

I write today’s final thoughts until I am no longer able to read what I write. By this time, more stars have appeared. I take in the immensity of my surroundings, from the silhouettes of the nearby peaks to the distant points of light of the Milky Way.

I put the camera bag, tripod, and water bottles in the tent and sit in the doorway to remove my shoes. Once inside, I zip shut the mosquito netting, undress, and crawl in the sleeping bag. The vestibule is left open to take in starlight and moonshine. Soon, I slip into contented sleep.

August 8, Return Lake

The first light strikes Stanton and Virginia peaks with Virginia emanating a reddish gold glow. There is nothing quite identical to the sunrise light in the High Sierra. As the sun inches higher, the golden glow transforms to more natural morning light, but there is still a distinct quality to the light as the sun climbs still higher. There is a reason the Sierra is called, in John Muir’s words, the “Range of Light.”

This may be my last layover day in the High Sierra wilderness. It’s an ideal location—a lake surrounded by peaks, the view extending all the way

from Twin Peaks to the lower end of Virginia Canyon. Also, today is exactly one year since my disastrous accident. I recall many of all the places I've been in the High Sierra beginning here in Virginia Canyon, once with Gordon and Barbara, and once with Barbara. That leads to recalling Pinchot Pass in 1996 where we negotiated the worst sun cups I've ever encountered. They were more like sun pits. I slipped and fell into one that was shoulder height. I couldn't climb out with a pack on so I took off the pack and lifted it up to the edge. Gordon came back to see if I was okay. He peered over the edge and seeing I was fine, laughed. Any frustration on my part dissolved. I handed him my trekking pole and climbed out by doing a chin up on the edge.

There's Kaweah and Picket Creek Basins, my favorite location in the Sierra. That sends my mind back two years ago to magnificent Brewer Basin and Red Devil Lake, which leads me to recall Lake Reflection, Darwin Bench, Upper Basin, Upper Kern, Milestone Basin. Rather than mitigating being here, this makes me feel fortunate to have experienced so much.

I am glad I changed my itinerary. I realize I don't need a goal destination. I need a destination that meets my goals. For now, Return Lake is that place.

I head off on a circumnavigation of Return Lake. While walking and exploring the nooks and crannies along and far above the shoreline, I remember every aspect of the journey down Little Slide Canyon exactly one year ago today: I find the chute by the cliffs where the snow had melted to create a clear pathway down to Ice Lake and the use trail that meandered above Ice Lake and down to above Maltby Lake; the yells of the climbers on the Incredible Hulk; the steep snowfield where I push my pack down and follow with kick steps; refinding the use trail, passing by the occupied campsite, following the trail over rocks and a small snowfield; the creek coming down on my left and the snow field with the trail duck on the other side.

Then, playing like a movie inside my head, the three seconds that changed everything: one second I spy the snow is undercut by the creek, another second I lie down on the snow to distribute my weight before crawling to my right, and the final second, in what feels like slow motion, I fall onto the large rock in the creek, my left shoulder and face bashing the rock. Then follows

excruciating pain and all the details of my rescue from the incredible kindness of total strangers to the incredible flying of the helicopter pilot who took me to a waiting ambulance for the trip to Mammoth Hospital.

It's all vivid in my memory and affecting my actions. I walk in trepidation up or down even the slightest slope. Encountering a small pile of level talus along the lakeshore, I think what if I slip and fall? What is a no-nonsense walk over a few talus blocks becomes a small terror.

This is a lesson on how the mind and memory can cause one to disconnect from rational reasoning. I tell myself there is no real danger, but something in my mind made my emotions react otherwise. The trick is being able to rationally approach the situation and make a choice based on reality, not deep-seated lizard-brain emotions. It's knowing one's self and one's true limitations, something that we all must deal with individually. Because one person was able to accomplish something does not automatically mean we all can. Does anyone who watches *Free Solo* believe they can free climb El Capitan? At the same time, it also means we may be able to accomplish more than we first assumed.

I tell myself to continue. I walk over the little talus field and all the other magnified obstacles to arrive back at my campsite in time for lunch. For the rest of this trip, any terror disappears and once again merely becomes rational caution.

Backpacking solo requires the self-awareness to be able to live with one's self. One must deal with one's only companion. Alone in the wilderness, there's no one else to reply to one's self-doubts and provide reassurance. The phobias and questions that linger in the back of the mind come to the front. What one experiences when backpacking solo is known only to one's self. No one else sees that particular slant of evening light or that particular peak from that exact perspective. That sensation can be thrilling or frightening. One may meet a parade of people on the trail and even engage in the lengthy conversations of the lonely, yet when walking alone no one else replies. When one crawls into the sleeping bag at night, no one else is there. One has to get along with one's self when residing in solitude in the backcountry wilderness.

In the afternoon, clouds again build to the southwest. There are distant booms of thunder. The clouds congregate on Stanton and Virginia peaks, but Return Lake remains beyond any storm. I wonder about Spiller Creek and Matterhorn canyons since they are under storm clouds with what appears to be sheets of rain. One of the oddities about High Sierra weather is one can be in sunshine while over the next ridge rainy black clouds emanate lightning.

I walk over the wide bench north of Return Lake that extends below Virginia Peak towards Twin Peaks. There's a glorious view of the Shepherd Crest when one moves far enough along the bench to see beyond the shoulder of the ridge rising above the lake. A group of four men arrive early afternoon, enjoying Return Lake, before heading down to Virginia Canyon at about 4:00. I see no one else the rest of the day.

After an early dinner, the day ends slowly with no distractions except photos, writing, and taking in the splendor. It is "sailors' delight" tonight, except the sky is more pink than red. The light gleams through the peaks. I forget the rest of the world to focus on this one moment of grandeur.

August 9, Return Lake to Upper Virginia Canyon

When I emerge from the tent at dawn, I realize I could make it down to Return Lake for a reflection foreground of a photo of the first light on Stanton and Virginia peaks. As I make my way to the outlet creek crossing, I discover it will require more than the lake itself as foreground due to the wind inhibiting reflections. Something needs to be part of the composition to give it character. As I near the outlet, there is nothing. I get on the lakeshore path and within a few steps I've found a foreground of rocks poking up above the water. The sunlight slowly illuminates Virginia Peak, Stanton Peak, the nearby ridges, and, finally, the pines and lakeshore.

As the morning awakens to another day, I sit and enjoy my final cup of coffee before I go into the canyon below. A chipmunk scoots over the area, foraging for breakfast. Birds hop around the area pecking at whatever they find. The cry of one bird sounds so plaintive, a blending of exuberance and

sadness, the joy and sorrow of life. For them, it is another summer morning in the High Sierra. For me, nothing is as magnificently magical as this morning in solitude at Return Lake.

After the four men left yesterday afternoon, I have seen no one. This is what I wanted and this is what I now have. Forever embedded in my memory are Stanton and Virginia peaks rising above the ellipse of Return Lake, it's shoreline talus and small clusters of whitebarks, the plants and flowers along the lakeshore, especially the "sword plants" as I call them; the view of Virginia Canyon stretching down below with Camiaca Peak and Excelsior Mountain rising above and the Shepherd Crest in the far distance.

I want one more day in upper Virginia Canyon before Summit Lake. I hope to get lucky and get the campsite where the three men camped the first night. Otherwise, it's wander further in the upper canyon to places I did not explore on that first day or head down the canyon looking for whatever I find before the trail crossing of Return Creek with lots of campsites.

I pack slowly since there's no reason to hurry. No matter where I end up today, the hiking will be relatively brief. After taking in the expansive splendor one more time, I head down the wide chute beyond my campsite. I see the first people since yesterday exploring near the campsite by the outlet creek. It is impossible to determine whether they are considering camping there or searching for the best way up to Return Lake. Following the landscape down, I pause to explore nooks and crannies tucked amid the scarce whitebarks before walking across the wide open area between the branches of Return Creek. I cross the creek near my first night's campsite and head toward the camping area in the line of trees. No one is in sight. There are at least three distinct tent areas, two close together and one further along with a textbook tent area nestled in trees with views of the Shepherd Crest in one direction and Virginia Peak in the other. There's a large erratic in the open area below the campsite that is perfect for leaning against. This seems ideal. If someone comes along, they can have the campsite next door.

While eating lunch, a couple of young hikers with masks come by looking for the trail to Virginia Pass and I inform them the trail to the pass heads off just before the creek crossing. After eating, I wander at whim, first following Return Creek down to the crossing where the Virginia Pass Trail heads right, marked by a small duck, and then up, up to the pass. The flowers along the creek are in full bloom, though not as abundant as they would have been last year.

Back through my current campsite, I head down to the creek past the downed tree that obliterated another campsite. This low-snow year, I can cross the creek on exposed rocks. On the other side, I walk over a wide open treeless expanse between the two branches of Return Creek, one from Return Lake and one descending from behind Virginia Peak, which the map delineates as Return Creek.

Crossing the mapped Return Creek, I come to a lovely large campsite and spy what looks like a use trail. Heading over the open land, I reach the trail as it angles up towards a stand of pines. When I reach the pines, there is a campsite area. Here, the use trail disappears. I continue up another quarter mile or so to another stand of trees bordering the open meadowlands that extend to the ridge between Virginia Peak and Twin Peaks. This seems a good meander so I wander back enthralled by the view of the Shepherd Crest rising at the far end of Virginia Canyon.

Back at my campsite, I lean up against the large erratic, writing, snacking, watching the local wildlife, and experiencing the stark stillness. Only the occasional jet flying high above disturbs the sounds of the wind and water, the sounds of the natural world. In the High Sierra, I am content doing nothing, at least in terms of many people's perspective. I don't go anywhere or accomplish any goals. I simply sit and gaze on the view and the activities of any visible wildlife. Chipmunks, squirrels, marmots, pikas (if I'm lucky), birds, and insects go about their daily routines as I idle away the time observing what they do. If I sit quietly enough, they often regard me as merely a presence in the background. They won't interact with me, as Thoreau's mouse at *Walden*, but they do ignore me and thus prove to be a fascinating diversion. Nothing profoundly wondrous occurs. It is the normal activity

of their day-to-day lives. There's something comforting in that. Despite the histrionics of humans, the rest of the natural world continues.

While observing the various wildlife, I also contemplate what the view is saying. Exact words are absent. It is conversation through feelings filtered through the personal prejudices engendered by private experiences. I sense something both intensely personal and also nearly infinite. To be here doing nothing can be incredibly productive if the consciousness is engaged. This transcendence of a High Sierra afternoon is stored deep in my memory to emerge when despairing of the folly of the human world.

At 5:00, I'm still in solitude. After dinner, I wander far and wide over the open area between the branches of Return Creek attempting to capture photos of the timberline wonderland stretching from Virginia Peak to Camiaca Peak down to the distant Shepherd Crest. High clouds around Virginia and Twin peaks block out the sunlight.

At sunset, sailors are overjoyed. Pink and red mix in the high clouds. Venus is up and accepting my wishes though I am not Jiminy Cricket and so can only hope. Surrounded by the wild silence of wilderness, I finally drift into quiet sleep.

August 10, Upper Virginia Canyon to Summit Lake

It is a spectacular dawn. A slight breeze wafts through the morning chill. Otherwise all is silence except the bubbling of Return Creek. There is a stillness of anticipation before the first light glows on Stanton Peak, Virginia Peak, and their neighboring spires. After that initial glow, the rising sun etches patterns of shadow and light on the crags.

Except for the two young hikers with masks yesterday, I haven't thought of the corona virus in three days. Wilderness solitude can bring blissful forgetfulness. One mostly escapes human caused maladies. By encroaching into every nook and cranny of our planet, we've created chaos, unleashing pandemics on the civilized world, a direct declaration of human folly. The fact that so many people fail to realize this only magnifies the hubris of our collective denial.

By preserving the wilderness through preventing the presence of humans except those who follow strict rules, we preserve a piece of Earth from the worst of human-caused calamities. In wilderness, the marks of human habitation are relatively small—mainly our careless garbage left here and there. If you get off the beaten tracks of main trails, that evidence of human encroachment is almost absent. I say almost because I have encountered deflated Mylar balloons off-trail between Sixty Lakes Basin and the John Muir Trail, Dusy Basin, Upper Basin, and even Lakes Basin. Those balloons will float in the air and land anywhere, just as the polluted air of the San Joaquin Valley drifts into the High Sierra.

After four nights in the timberline paradise of upper Virginia Canyon, I begin the hike down to the junction and up to Summit Lake. I have a different perspective on the Virginia Pass Trail than when I was hiking up. In the morning light, Return Creek sparkles as it winds down to the junction. At the main trail intersection by Return Creek, the campsite we stayed at in 1988 is occupied by a young couple. As I am about to begin the climb to Summit Lake, the packer I met on the first day passes by and we exchange greetings. The climb, as expected, is tedious, but not particularly difficult. The view gets better as I climb; the distant peaks of Yosemite appear on the horizon with Mt. Hoffman being the easiest to distinguish. Finally, the trail levels off; Summit Lake and the park boundary sign come into view.

The best campsite at this far end above the lake is occupied by a young girl and her parents. Of the other campsites, I can't decide between one tucked in the pines above the trail or another one about thirty yards away. I end up choosing the one tucked in the pines since it includes a lovely lake view.

After setting up, I explore towards the far end of the large lake. Summit Lake is a half mile long ellipse. The trail follows the northern shoreline since the southern shore rises directly up to peak 11,270 at the end of the ridge culminating at Excelsior Mountain, making that side of the lake nearly impossible to navigate. While there is something aesthetically marvelous in its symmetry, the lack of islands and inlets makes Summit Lake less

picturesquely fascinating than many other Sierra lakes. Unlike most lakes, the far shores do not have peaks rising immediately above. Both far shores of this Summit Lake end at a relatively level landscape before plunging down at the horizon, making the lake more aptly named than some other Summit Lakes, which sit below a high pass at one end, such as at Piute Pass or Mono Pass.

Sitting leaning on a rock on the other side of the trees at my campsite, I reiterate to myself to appreciate the singular beauty before me here and now; do not compare this place to any other. I take in the view in three directions, especially of northern Yosemite, while a parade of people pass by on the trail below. The couple who were camped at the Return Creek crossing go by without noticing me followed by a small group of adults and teens. The Virginia Lakes packer who I met on the beginning of the climb returns late afternoon. He is the last person until three hikers who want to know how far it is to the nearest trailhead. I tell them Green Creek and Virginia Lakes are both about six miles, but Virginia Lakes involves the climb over the ridge while Green Creek is downhill. However, there is a resort at Virginia Lakes unlike more isolated Green Creek. If they don't want to hike out today, I let them know about the excellent campsites at the east end that were unoccupied a little while ago.

It's been breezy all day. The wind is quiet and then builds into stronger gusts, then subsides until the next cycle. As the clouds increase, the wind builds to larger gusts, but the clouds never materialize into anything beyond threatening. In the distance the weather look's a little more ominous.

It is an unusual sunset. The storm clouds prevent sunlight, but the clouds themselves are not particularly interesting. I wander the area before the trail begins its plunge to Virginia Canyon and find a spot that gives a view from Mt. Hoffman over to Gray Butte, Stanton Peak, and Virginia Peak. Between 7:25 and 7:45 things begin to change. The sunlight comes through to create a grand finale.

I take in all of this as deeply as possible. Today has been one day of truly being in a place. As I drift into sleep, the wind swirls through the pines.

August 11, Summit Lake to Virginia Lakes Trailhead

I am startled awake by the pitter-patter of rain on the tent. Oops, the vestibule is open. I extricate myself from the snugness of my sleeping bag to sit up and reach the zipper to shut the vestibule and keep the rain out. One never knows when adverse weather will strike in the High Sierra. This is not the first time I've had to zip shut the vestibule in the middle of the night and I hope it won't be the last. I drift back to sleep to sounds of rain on the roof.

I awake at dawn. A couple of shallow puddles on the trail are the only indication of last night's rain as I make my way to yesterday evening's view spot for sunrise photos. This morning's light is not particularly spectacular, but I enjoy the emergence of a new day.

As I sit after breakfast with my coffee, I feel as if I should be writing something profound on this final morning. I think back, once again, to past trips, too many to count, from Cottonwood Pass to Virginia Pass and all the miles in between. It has been a good run for over 40 years. I made it to most of the places I wanted except Tablelands, Blackcap Basin, and Tehipite Valley. My mind contemplates many memories, beginning with when I first fell in love with the High Sierra at Fletcher Lake. It's a love that has only intensified over the years. An unmatched sense of transcendence is discovered and rediscovered on all my wilderness journeys. That sense will not end until I am incapable of sitting in solitude and taking in the wonders of the natural world.

With this resolve in mind, I gaze over the west end of Summit Lake and beyond to the peaks of northern Yosemite. I close the notebook, stand up, and go back to my campsite to finish packing before finding my way from Summit Lake over the ridge to Virginia Lakes.

As I conclude packing, the family with the little girl camped at the end of the lake pass by on the trail. As they pause to take in Summit Lake, I pass them. We play trail leap frog until they leave me in the dust as I plod up the climb to the saddle separating the drainages. The climb is not as bad as expected.

Thunder rumbles from black clouds hovering over the ridge between Black Mountain and Excelsior Mountain. I forego a rest stop at the top of the ridge due to drizzle. I put on my rain jacket, hike down the switchbacks, and the drizzle stops. Pausing for lunch at one of the Frog Lakes, I remove the rain jacket. After eating and walking past Cooney Lake, the drizzle returns with enough frequency to cause me to put back on the rain jacket. I meet many day hikers of all ages, from a boy and girl ages six to eight with their parents to an elderly couple who seem to be in their late seventies and still enjoying hiking in the High Sierra.

The many side trails from Blue Lake to Virginia Lakes could be baffling, but I manage to stay on the correct trail to arrive at the nearly full trailhead parking lot by the Hoover Wilderness sign. When I go to the lake to wash off the trail dust and change into clean clothes, there are many people fishing or simply enjoying being by the lake.

As I am driving along the Virginia Lakes Road, I see a car parked at a large dirt road pull-out. A woman is talking on her cell phone. I get out my phone and see a signal. As I round a curve, the signal disappears. A u-turn at a small pullout sends me back to where the woman was talking. She is back in her car and heads down to Conway Summit. I pull into the dirt road. My phone still shows no signal. As I am staring at my phone, two bars appear. I dial home and speak to Barbara for the first time since last Wednesday. She is fine and now knows I am, too.

Storm clouds hover over Mono Lake to the north, south, and east, but the drive down and through Lee Vining remains dry. The rest of the long drive home is routine. No ranger is at either Yosemite entrance kiosk at Tioga Pass or Big Oak Flat. I stop for gas in Oakdale at the same Shell station I've stopped at since 1978. The usual wild drivers head up and over Altamont Pass. The traffic at the Bay Bridge maze moves at the limit, a pleasant surprise.

I drive home with a sense of satisfaction. I spent five days immersed in the wilderness. Whatever happens tomorrow, I had my days of serenity. With the knowledge and realization I existed in the transcendence of solitude, I return to the biological and social reality of modern life. Unfortunately, we cannot exist in a perpetual state of grace.

The next afternoon, the video visit with the Kaiser cardiologist fails to correctly connect. I hope this isn't a precursor of the rest of the visit. The cardiologist phones. He's looked at the results from the thirty-day heart monitor and the electrocardiogram. He sees no evidence of a "sick sinus syndrome." That was an incorrect diagnosis by a doctor unfamiliar with my atrial fibrillation. My personal physician agrees with the cardiologist's diagnosis. Yes, I have heart problems. No, that should not prevent me from backpacking in the High Sierra or anywhere else. I am ecstatic. It was not my last backpacking trip, at least for now.

I realize my days are not so much numbered as inevitable. I live life knowing each and every day is precious.